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SUBJECT: STUDENT TAKES RISK TO DISCUSS LIFE IN BASRAH

CLASSIFIED BY: Louis L. Bono, Director, Basrah Regional Embassy
Office, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

11. (C) A Basrah Student Union leader met the Regional Embassy Office (REO) director on May 7, to talk about Basrah University and life in general for the educated and moderate citizens of Basrah. The director noted the risk involved in visiting the REO and asked the student why he came in. The student, who is about 20 years old, replied that the risk was indeed great. He was aware that the gate to the REO is watched, but he was also aware that REO staff could not travel into Basrah. He thus felt it important "to tell the Americans what is happening in the city." He said most people still appreciate the Americans for ridding Iraq of Saddam, but life in the city has become much more difficult. There are few jobs and few prospects for students, the cost of consumer goods has risen, and most people live in fear of the militias. He said militias such as JAM continue to terrorize students and professors, and many students join political parties for protection. (Note: A Sunni lecturer at Basrah University was assassinated this past week. End note.)

12. (C) He also derided the election process. He said people vote on lists based on their religion or provincial ties, without any concern for the candidates or their platforms. The director noted that universities and students play an important role around the world bringing political issues to the forefront and suggested the student union sponsor political debates. The student replied to do so would be life threatening.

13. (SBU) As for Basrah University, he said that the students had recently lodged a series of complaints with the University's administration regarding, inter alia, the lack of laboratories, the increase in fees, the poor state of the facilities, and the lack of qualified instructors, particularly in the English Department. He said fees are currently 550,000 to 750,000 Iraqi dinars (\$400 - \$600) per semester, a significant increase from the 2004 tuition of 100,000 dinars (\$80). He said Basrah University is not as good as it once was, but he still considers it to be one of the most prestigious, saying it is ranked 16th in the world.

14. (C) When asked about job prospects, the student said he knows many engineers and lawyers who take menial jobs as mechanics or taxi drivers because there are no jobs available in their field. He estimated that only 10% of his friends are employed in their profession. (Note: Many of the REO laborers have professional degrees. End note.) When asked about civil service jobs, he said you must pay a bribe to obtain one and in any event those normally go to party members, which is another reason why students are joining political parties.

15. (C) Despite the bleak prospects, he still holds out hope: "without hope, you have nothing" he said. He believes it is important to for the United States to maintain close ties with the people of Basrah to help nurture democracy and the economy

and to offset the Iranian influence, which he fears is becoming too pervasive. He said university and cultural exchanges are important to improving relations. He agreed that a roundtable discussion between students and REO staff would be beneficial for all involved, but said the students would not want to be seen traveling to the REO. Nonetheless, he will try to convince his fellow students to participate.

16. (SBU) Comment: It took a lot of courage for this young man to walk into the REO during the middle of the day, but his visit underscores our belief that the most people in Basrah share our vision of a stable, free, and prosperous Iraq.

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